

# The Discursive Construction of the International Community: Evidence from the United Nations General Assembly

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# The Discursive Construction of the International Community: Evidence from the United Nations General Assembly

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Mor Mitrani

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# THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

## EVIDENCE FROM THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

**Mor Mitrani**

### Abstract

The idea that states can hold common values and standards of conduct as well as some capacity to act in the international arena in collective manners for collective goals is epitomized in the concept of international community. Although the term is widely used by scholars, practitioners, and international political leaders and is an integral part of the common international vocabulary, only few have sought to define it, identify its members, and characterize its ways of actions and sources of legitimacy. This paper asks: Who is the international community? Taking a socio-discursive approach, I argue that the international community is essentially a construct that does not exist beyond the discursive level, namely that it materializes only when political agents talk about it, refer to it, and attribute to it certain values, rules, and virtues. I present here the findings of an automated text analysis of 4264 states' speeches at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) that point to the prevalence of the international community in the international discourse and reveal the main topics that are associated with it. These findings illuminate salience patterns in the discursive construction of the international community and shed light on its function as a legitimacy framework for international action.

### The Author



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## 1. Introduction

The concept of international community implies the ability of states to hold common values and standards of conduct as well as some capacity to act in the international arena in collective manners for collective goals. Although the term is widely used by scholars, practitioners, and international political leaders, most usages of it take its existence for granted. Only few have sought to explore the international community as a subject in its own right, let alone define it, identify its members, and characterize its ways of actions and sources of legitimacy (see for example Abi-Saab 1998; Addis 2008; Bliesemann de Guevara/Kühn 2011; Danilenko 1991; Tsagourias 2006; Warbrick/Tierney 2006).

The depiction of the international community as “a community of morals, ethics, and common identities” (Ellis 2009: 5) renders the academic discourse on this subject highly normative. It focuses on the normative aspects of the international community and assesses its functionality at the normative level, mainly as a desired end goal (Bliesemann de Guevara/Kühn 2011: 137-139; Buzan/Gonzalez-Pelaez 2005). However, aside from the normative discussion on the international community, which often results in the assertion that it is no more than a political myth or an empty rhetorical device, I contend that the mere tendency of states to refer to themselves as an international community deserves attention and scrutiny.

This paper aims at asking who the international community is. As states often refer to the international community, calling it to act in certain situations or to fulfill their expectations of it, construing who the international community is can shed light on the political functions that the international community serves as a collective reference point. Taking a socio-discursive approach, I argue that the international community is essentially a discursive construct that materializes only when political agents refer to it and attribute to it certain values, rules, and virtues. Therefore, in order to understand the international community, we should trace how it is constructed and re-constructed through interactions among its members that define it and assign specific meanings to the notion of the collective We of states (Bliesemann de Guevara/Kühn 2011; Buzan/Gonzalez-Pelaez 2005). Focusing on the discursive interactions among states, I strive to portray how members of the international community understand, experience, and express the roles played by the international community in world politics. I suggest that by exploring the ways in which states communicate and talk about the international community, we can learn who it is, what its main building blocks are, and what roles it plays in world politics.

This is a first working paper in the context of a greater project. It aims to both portray a general analytical perspective on the international community as a discursive construct and to present first findings based on the analysis of 4264 speeches in the annual general debate of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) (1992-2014). To this end, its first section discusses the international community as an analytical construct and its role as a legitimacy framework in world politics. The second section develops a socio-discursive approach to analyzing the international community. It argues that since the concept of the “international community” is both a discursive choice and a discursive practice, the optimal way to understand it is to examine how the concept is perceived and constructed by states through inter-state interactions in the context of inter-state discourse. The third section provides general guidelines of the research design in terms of methodology and database. The fourth section presents the findings of the research project and shows the prevalence of the international community in international discourse as well as the distribution

of attention across the ten main topics that construct the international community discourse. The last section presents avenues for future research and discusses the potential contribution of the research project.

## 2. The International Community as an Analytical Category

The concept of community, as rooted in sociological writings, denotes a human association in which individuals interact based upon shared common features of identity. In his seminal book “*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*” (Tönnies 1963 [1887]), Ferdinand Tönnies distinguishes between two ideal-types of peaceful social association: *Gemeinschaft* (“community”) and *Gesellschaft* (“society”). *Gemeinschaft* as opposed to *Gesellschaft* is united by will, a feature that establishes not only shared understandings, identity, and interests, but also the possibility of a collective action based on an authentic sense of unity and shared moral imperatives. As the focus in both association types is inevitably on the interactions and relationships among the members, in order to identify whether there is an international community, we first need to define who its members are and to assess whether they share (or at least see themselves as sharing) commonalities that establish an authentic sense of unity.

A conception of the international community as a community of states assumes that groups of states (or other international actors) are capable of both sharing a certain level of communal feeling and acting on behalf of this shared feeling.<sup>1</sup> According to Schimmelfennig (2001, 2002), a community environment in the international context operates under the conditions of a common ethos and a high interaction density, which are the two requisites for communal relations among states and thus for treating the international community as an analytical category. However, while this framework assumes that states can form a community ethos, it is not specific in regard to the content of this ethos, nor does it address the particular identity features of states that may infuse a community ethos. Furthermore, empirically it relies mainly on the (one might say easy) case of the European community in which we can expect a higher degree of integration and interaction and hence a stronger collective identity, but that derives from the regional identity rather than from the international one (see also Buzan/Gonzalez-Pelaez 2005: 37).

Can we envisage the international community as an analytical construct outside of the regional context, as a collective We of states characterized by a common ethos and high interaction density based on their shared identity of “state-ness”? Schimmelfennig (2002: 426) defines the common ethos as “the constitutive values and norms that define the collective identity of the community,” but what could be the collective identity of states? In his seminal account of the state as a social agent in the international realm, Wendt advances a depiction of the state as a Self and suggests a definition of any state, at any time, and in any place as “an organizational actor embedded in an institutional-legal order that constitutes it with sovereignty

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<sup>1</sup> Note that some conceptualize international community in a wider context as the community of mankind, resonating with the concept of world society (e.g. Burton 1972; Krücken/Drori 2010; Luhmann 1997; Meyer 2010; Williams 2005). However, a cosmopolitan conception of the international community of individuals stands in contradiction to the idea of the international community of states, as it cannot be realized in practice while world politics are still governed and managed by states and state-centric institutions. As a normative construct, this perspective is less conducive to an empirical attempt to understand the international community.

and a monopoly on the legitimate use of organized violence over a society on a territory" (Wendt 1999: 213). Such an essential definition allows us to understand the state as a social actor, and thus being a state means being part of a certain class. It further facilitates a distinction between states and non-states, and points to the identity features that shape and construct the "state as such" and therefore its repertoire of actions. The portrayal of the state as a Self also assumes, by definition, the portrayal of a collective of selves, of a collective We of states. The I's in a collective We of states share, at the minimum, the class of being a state (Wendt 1999: 213). Thus, the core identity of being a state is the basis for a collective ethos that is infused with shared understandings regarding the roles of "a state" and "the states" in world politics (Koslowski/Kratochwil 1994: 225; also see Zehfuss 2002: 12-15).

How do states know and understand the roles of "a state" and "the states" in world politics? According to Thomas Franck, compliance embodies states' ability to predict "that state conduct will definitely be constrained by the commitments states have accepted" (Franck 2006: 92)<sup>2</sup> and therefore assumes the operation of a communal setting as a "social system of continuing interaction and transaction" that establishes "an ongoing, structured relationship between a set of actors" (Franck 1995: 10). In this community framework, agents not only share understandings of what being a state implies, but also commit to acting in awareness of these understandings. The array of commitments, of the "rules of the game," points to the membership criteria in a certain community, to the standards of accepted and expected behavior (Schimmelfennig 2001), and exercises legitimate authority of the community over its members. The contents and substance of the international collective ethos and of what it means to be and act as a state are therefore constantly and dynamically constructed through interactions among states that constitute and sustain the community of states.

The public usages of language give meanings to a collective by serving as an instrument for both the interaction among the members of the group and the understanding of these interactions. From a discursive perspective, a collective ethos is not a cognition but rather the product of talk and discursive interactions that give name to the collective, shape membership, and cast meanings to its identity embodied in textual manifestations (Collins 1981; Hardy et al. 2005). Starting from the premise that to a great extent the international arena is framed by and even based on using language for deliberation, reasoning, and argumentation (Krebs/Jackson 2007; Müller 2004; Risse 2000), we can gain important insights in regard to social relations among states by exploring observable linguistic practices (Hardy et al. 2005; Potter/Wetherell 1987). Therefore, if we wish to explore who or what the international community is, we should theorize it as a discursive construct and trace the linguistic practices that are associated with it as well as the political functions these practices serve to shape the normative and practical aspects of international politics.<sup>3</sup>

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2 This claim resonates with the English school of International Relations (IR) and the socio-legal framework of Hugo Grotius who portrays the international society as a community of those who take part in an international legal order that is governed (also) by the institution of international law (Bull 1977; Koh 1997: 2606). For a further discussion on the affinity between the international community and the international society, see Mitrani, forthcoming.

3 Note in this regard Krebs and Jackson's (2007) critique of the theorization of political deliberation and argumentation, on the grounds that it focuses on revealing the logic of behavior at the expense of rhetorical aspects.



### 3. The Discursive Construction of the International Community

There is no ontological answer to who or what the international community is. It is neither determined a priori nor does it reflect any kind of universal values (Bliesemann de Guevara/Kühn 2011; Koskenniemi 2004). The international community is a discursive construct. It exists only when political agents refer to its existence and attribute to it certain values, rules, and virtues or depict it as an agent that is called into action or is assigned responsibility. The international community is constituted and sustained by the acknowledgment of various social actors that attribute to it specific virtues and conceptions of what the community should be and how it should act. In this respect, it is both a discursive choice and a discursive practice that agents embrace as a means to perform and operate in the context of a specific self-collective relationship (Fairclough 1993; Hardy et al. 2005). The discursive construction of the international community allows to locate the I within the We in a day-to-day communication and informs states' actions as an I in the context of the We. Since the I's that form the collective in case are political entities, the construction of the international community bears political implications on both normative and practical levels, as it is depicted as both a political structure and a political agent. At the structure level, it is a container that can be filled with content regarding the collective identity of states and thus create a link between specific normative and practical attributes to the notion of community and the societal sphere of the international. As a notional structure, it can provide guidance and establish boundaries of legitimate actions through common institutions, as it transcends individual members by referring to and establishing a collective We of states. Alongside the structural features, the international community is often referred to as a "pseudo-entity" that is capable of acting in or responding to specific situations. It is, of course, an imagined construct, an agent that does not exist, but by constructing it, one may bestow upon it legitimacy and responsibility for actions of both agents that arguably act on its behalf and of the collective ethos of the We of states.

Thus, the international community can be utilized as a normative reference point to demarcate right and wrong or as a moral beacon of universal values and solidarity (Ellis 2009; Kovach 2003) that arguably represents a grand collective identity. At the practical level, it may be used as a reference point for rationalizing action in general and collective action in particular and for identifying the "audience of normals" in stigmatization processes (Adler-Nissen 2014). In both instances, the international community serves as a socio-political construct that states are aware of and minded to (whether they operate in its context or not). Its distinguishing feature is the status of its members, the nation-states, and thus sovereignty as the main principle of "being a state" is both the basic entry criteria and the building block of the community ethos that infuses it with meaning and substance. These meanings are constructed through discursive interactions that not only reflect the existence of an international community, but also constitute it epistemologically as a unique sphere for states' conduct. It is thus not a question of whether states truly mean that there is such a community or if they believe in the norms and rules it arguably represents, but rather a question of the discursive choices agents make in constructing their common reality as a collective and in framing their norms and practices in its context (Collins 1981: 999f).

Given the tight connection between notions of community and legitimacy of both the community itself and of its members, it is not surprising that the (limited) literature on the international community suggests that legitimization is its main political function (Buzan/ Gonzalez-Pelaez 2005). In both normative and practical contexts, agents can make political use of the international community discourse in two main ways.

First, to set the legitimate array of issues on the international agenda. Second, to make the distinction between the in-group and the out-group and to mark the conditions for participation in the international community, namely define what legitimate state conduct is. The concept of international community has thus the power to legitimize those who wish to portray themselves as acting in its name and in line with its normative frameworks. Conversely, it can also be used to single-out, de-legitimize, and even exclude those who fail to follow or fall short of the standardized conduct (see Bliesemann de Guevara/Kühn 2011 for an extensive account on these issues). All of these functions depend on the extent to which the international community itself is conceived as legitimate, hence on the extent to which states affiliate themselves and their actions with it through discursive interactions.

International politics is essentially discursive or mediated by discourse, both at the day-to-day micro level through interactions, speeches, and diplomatic communication; and in the wider framework through constitutive texts that institutionalize and regulate international relations (i.e. treaties, charters, etc.). Systematic text and discourse analysis is thereby a valid lens for scrutinizing international concepts and phenomena, mainly because it allows a broader outlook on interactions that crystalizes common understandings, introduces them, and spreads them publically. The purpose is thus not only to argue that the international community is what states make of it, but also to ask what exactly they are making of it. Arguably, discursive references to the international community have no “real” consequences as states cannot be practically excluded from the community or from the political order it supposed to represent (Bliesemann de Guevara/Kühn 2011: 45f). Nonetheless, in the discursive construction of the international community, the self meets the collective, and so the interaction depends on presenting a credible and legitimate I within a We. The international community is therefore a dynamic discursive vessel that attains its political power and political functions through interactions. These political functions and power can, on the one hand, be used in ambivalent and contested ways by multiple actors; but on the other hand, they are constrained by collective social structures and experiences. An analysis of the discursive construction of the international community can shed light on discursive processes of legitimization among states in two aspects. First, in regard to the *legitimacy of the collective and its members*, I argue that naming and referring to the international community is a legitimizing device through which states both reinforce their collective constituents and claim their own individual legitimacy. Moreover, the specific thematic contexts the international community is associated with serve as *the legitimate array of political issues* for action in the international arena. The next section will further elaborate on the research design and methodological framework the research project is built upon, presenting text-based analysis as a method to understand the discursive construction of the international community.

## 4. Database and Method

### 4.1 Textual Corpus

In this working paper, I suggest mapping the discursive use of the concept “international community” as a means to trace the construction of the international community. To this end, I searched for a discursive arena in which states regularly interact and discuss world affairs based on equal access. Under Article 10 of

the United Nations (UN) Charter, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) is regarded as the widest participation forum on world affairs. It is the all-inclusive core of the organization in which all member states, represented by their delegations, convene on a regular basis and enjoy equal access to discussions according to the “one state-one vote” principle, and it thus serves as the main forum for legitimization debates at the international level (Claude 1966). Critics often depict the UNGA as a ritualistic, non-authoritative “cheap talk” hub of sterile discussions in which states enflame problems rather than solve them (Franda 2006: 91).

Nonetheless, the virtues of the UNGA lie less in the decisions that the member states make and vote on, which can certainly be questioned in terms of operational effectiveness or equality, but rather in its essence as an arena in which states present their stands. As such, and aside from the important questions regarding its effectiveness and ability to meet its purposes, the UNGA can and should be reckoned as a social institution (Franda 2006: 224). The UNGA serves as the formal and broader public sphere where members who share statist features gather in order to communicate and deliberate on issues and matters that concern them as states and which they seek to govern. The UNGA discourse is therefore attuned to the collective, to common understandings, and to the need to balance, at least at the discursive level, the interests and preferences of the individual I and the constitutive elements of the collective We of states. Therefore, it is also a discursive arena in which states could be expected to construct legitimacy standards as it allows states to interact regularly in a specific institutional framework over accepted and expected international conduct (Steffek 2003: 265).

The regular annual session of the UNGA begins every year in mid-September in the New York headquarters with the traditional “General Debate.” The general debate is a distinctive event outside of the regular agenda of the UNGA and it does not adopt any formal decisions (Peterson 1986: 267). Despite its name, it is not merely a debate but rather a battery of states’ speeches, usually led by heads of states or foreign ministers. Yet, this sequence of speeches is an opportunity for every member state to voice its views on the state of international politics to both domestic and international audiences, to the extent that it has become an international practice. This is an institutionalized forum of verbal interactions anchored to a specific context, in which actors speak as individuals within a collective, for a collective, and on behalf of a collective. Although critics have pointed to the ritualized and formalized features of the general debate’s speeches (Luard 1994: 42), these texts can signify and reflect states’ perceptions and experiences of world affairs, and thus serve as “a barometer” (Smith 2006: 153) to identify issues of significance and thus to trace the agenda of international politics (Mingst/Karns 2011). Therefore, while states do not really talk to each other, they talk about themselves, with themselves, and in an international context that has managed to become highly institutionalized since 1945. Thus, although the UNGA’s general debate seems like an easy case, it is essential for the purpose of this project for two reasons. First, since it is unique in the sense that it is the only ritualistic discursive arena in which states come together on a regular basis and present their positions on world politics in a universal setting and in a non-mediated way. Second, since this is a first empirical attempt to trace the discursive construction of the international community in a systematic and exhaustive way, it is an excellent starting point that can and should serve as a basis for further comparative projects tracing the construction of the international community in various domains.

The text corpus for this research project is an original database of the annual speeches of 196 states at the UNGA general debate (1992-2014; n=4246 texts).<sup>4</sup> The database provides the possibility to conduct a large-N study over time, as these texts offer first-hand evidence of the dynamic processes of construction of the international community since the end of the Cold War. These texts can render both the array of states' experiences of certain phenomena and collective patterns with regard to them, and thus enable us to extract what states are talking about in a discursive setting that constructs them, by definition, as a specific I within a We. Therefore, while it is possible to learn about states' individual positions via these texts, it is also possible (and not less valuable) to deduce states' collective experiences and positions regarding world politics and the core of international relations in their most literal meaning.

## 4.2 Method

The empirical research is designed to assess the frequency and density of the concept "international community" and to map the contexts and topics that are associated with it. First, it seeks to explore the presence and extent of the international community as a discursive construct in inter-state discourse. It assumes that patterns of naming and recognizing the international community construct its existence and legitimacy and then analyzes the frequency patterns of references to the international community in international discursive interactions. Second, it surveys the issues and topics that states give attention to in the context of the international community and analyzes, using topic modeling method, states' references to the international community in order to map the various elements that construct the international community. A topic modeling analysis is in fact an automated unsupervised factor analysis to deduce patterns of co-occurrences of words in designated segments of texts in order to determine their relative weight in constructing a specific topic. The result is therefore supposed not only to reflect which words are mentioned, but also to take into consideration their relative role in constructing each topic.

To both ends, I apply methods of automated computerized text analysis using the QDA Miner and Wordstat software.<sup>5</sup> All the texts of the speeches were manually collected, indexed, and uploaded to the software (n=4246 speeches). For the purpose of the analysis of the discursive construction of the international community, the software filtered all references to the phrase and created a subset of all the sentences that include such reference (n=15,122 cases). Due to the very small unit of analysis, sentence level, I did not employ any kind of pre-processing procedures like stemming or lemmatization. The topic modeling analysis automatically excluded – in line with conventional practices of computerized text analysis – stop words and all other words that appeared in less than ten percent and more than 90 percent of texts.

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4 Based on the premise that the general debate allows equal access to all of those who are considered as members of the international community, I included all speeches by all states that were included in the general debate including micro states, failed states, and non-state members like the Palestinian Authority (see Voeten 2004 for a different approach).

5 For more information on the software, see the developer's website: <http://provalisresearch.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-software/>.

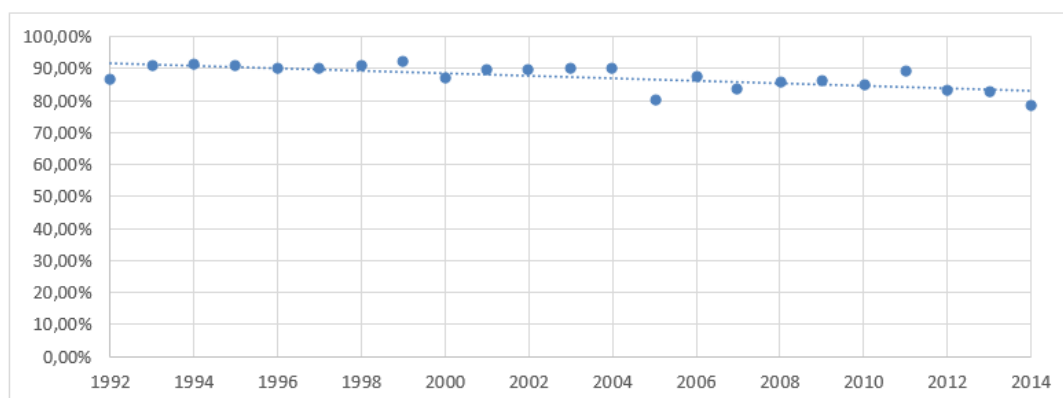
In recent years there has been a rise of computerized text analysis and computational linguistics in political science and mainly in comparative politics (see Lucas et al. 2013; Monroe/Schrodt 2008; Scharkow 2013 for reviews on computerized methods and political analysis). However, despite the growing salience and variety of “text-as-data” studies in the wide field of political science, such methods are much less common in the subfield of IR. Works that applied computerized text analysis in IR usually either utilize lexical-based approach in order to code events data based on news wires reports (King/Lowe 2003; Murdie/Davis 2012; Schrodt 2012) or perform automated coding to NGOs reports, mainly in the field of human rights (e.g. Fariss et al. 2015). There are much fewer studies which treat international texts – i.e. texts that are produced by states (or by international organizations) in international settings – as data that can provide insights regarding processes of agenda-setting, political attention, and political positions (see as exceptions Alschner/Skougarevskiy 2016; Bagozzi 2015; Bailey et al. 2017).

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 *The Presence of the International Community in the UNGA Discourse and the Curious Case of the United States*

The phrase “international community” is mentioned 15,122 times in the states’ speeches in the UN general debate between 1992 and 2014. It is the second most frequent phrase in these speeches (after “United Nations”) and it appears in 87.35 percent of speeches (3709 out of 4246, an average of 3.5 mentions in a speech). The dominance of the concept suggests that in general, states tend to refer to the idea of a collective We of states and are attended to the notion of the international community.<sup>6</sup> There is only a slight variance in the usage patterns across years (see Figure 1) and a more apparent but not substantive variance across states (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: References to the “International Community” across Years

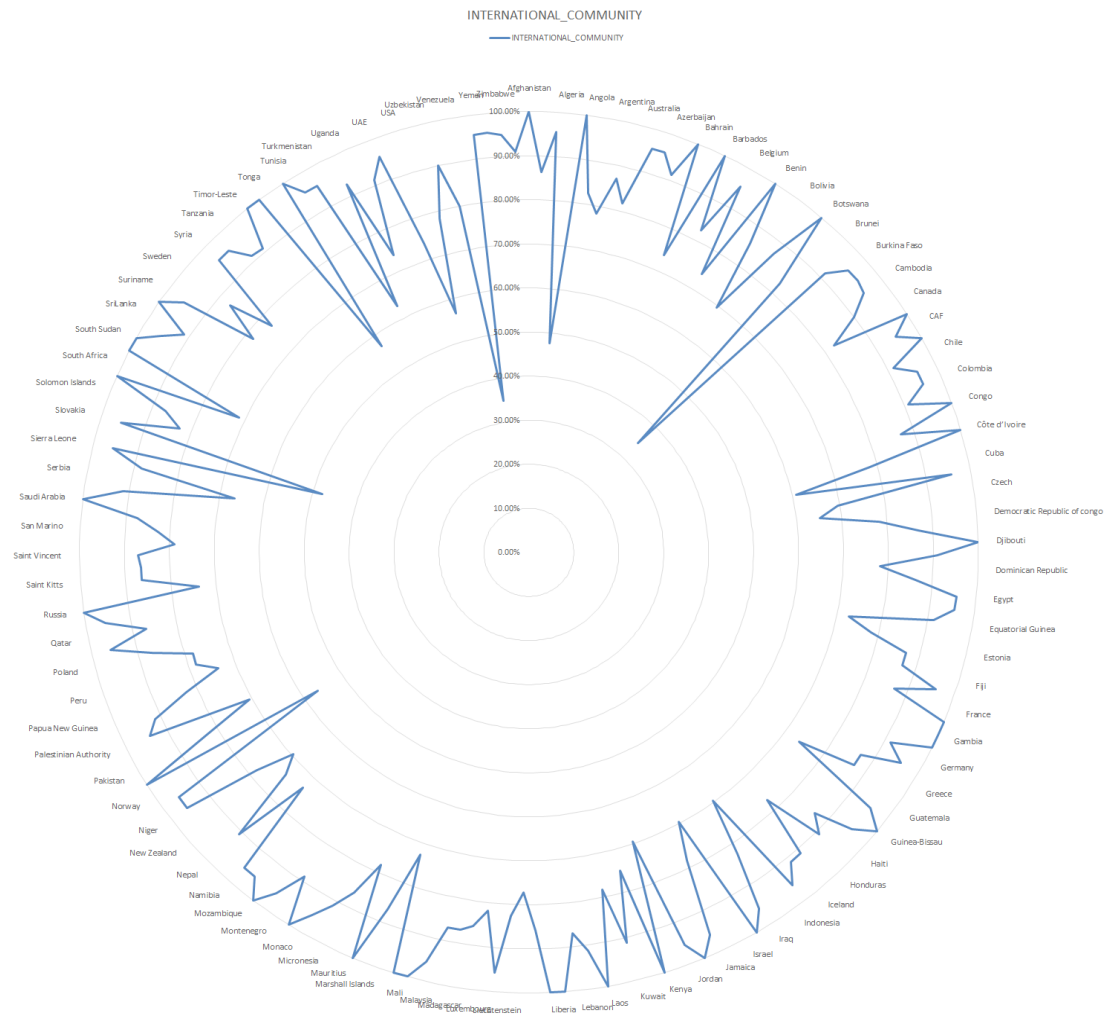


**Note:** The figure shows the percentage of speeches in the UN general debate in a given year, in which the term “international community” was mentioned (n=4264; 1992-2014).

<sup>6</sup> The word “We” is one of the most frequent words in the UNGA speeches, but it is problematic to distinguish between “We the states” and other references to “We,” although in many cases states do refer to a collective We of states.

Seventy percent of states (136 of 196), have mentioned the term in at least 87 percent of their speeches and thus met or exceeded the average value of references. Thirty-six states mentioned the phrase in all of their UN speeches. Only seven states have referred to the phrase in less than 60 percent of their speeches (Brunei Darussalam: 35 %; Venezuela: 35 %; Andorra: 48 %; Singapore: 48 %; Norway: 57 %; Tonga: 57 %; and US: 57 %).

Figure 2: References to the “International Community” across States



**Note:** The figure shows the percentage of speeches in the UN general debate given by a specific state in which the term “international community” was mentioned (n=4264; 1992-2014).

Both Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate quite clearly the extent to which the concept of international community is present and dominant in the international discourse at the UNGA. This is, however, only a first stage in understanding the concept, and now the main question is to reflect on which contents and substances are attributed to it, namely to explore what states are talking about when referring to the international community. Any attempt to represent through qualitative examples in a valid and genuine way such a large corpus is deemed to fail. After all, the textual utterances that compose the corpus were collected from 195 different actors and over a time period of 25 years. While the computerized analysis treats all states equally,

the most interesting state is probably the United States, for two main reasons. First the international community is often equated with the US as the most powerful and dominant actor in the international arena since the end of the Cold War. Second, and conversely, the US is one of the six outliers and thus the tendency of the US to use the concept less frequently than the majority of states calls for further scrutiny in order to understand if and how it contributes to the discursive construction of the international community.

Twenty out of 23 speeches of the US in the general debate (1992-2014) were given by US president (three were given by US Secretary of State in 1995, 2000, and 2005). In ten out of 23 speeches, the term “international community” is not mentioned at all: three years under Bill Clinton (1994; 1996; 1998); five years under George W. Bush (2001-05), and two years under Barack Obama (2009; 2012). Interestingly, the term is completely absent during the first five years of the Bush administration. This is quite perplexing in the context of the 9/11 events in 2001 and the invasion of Afghanistan (2002) and Iraq (2003) that characterized his first term and are often seen as the contemporary world-level crises that have both challenged the international community and required re-defining it and its role.

Alongside the tendency of the US to refrain from referring to the international community between 2001 and 2005, not less interesting are the specific contexts in which the US does mention the international community and thus contributes to the discursive construction of the international community. Reading through the contexts in which the US refers to the international community provides a first glance on the themes that are associated with the concept and on its role in the construction of the self as a member of the wider We. For example, in 1993, in the context of the conflict in Bosnia, Clinton stated:

*And if the parties to that conflict take the hard steps needed to make a real peace, the international community – including the United States – must be ready to help in its effective implementation.*

Similarly, in 2006 George Bush said:

*For the last two years, America joined with the international community to provide emergency food aid and support for an African Union peacekeeping force.*

The US also acknowledges other members of the community. For example, in 2010 Obama contended the following:

*As part of our effort on non-proliferation, I offered the Islamic Republic of Iran an extended hand last year and underscored that it has both rights and responsibilities as a member of the international community.*

As opposed to some of the voices in the public discourse, the US does not equate itself to the international community. It rather portrays the international community as both a collective agent capable of acting and a collective structure that the US is a member of. For example, in his 1993 speech Clinton depicted it as an acting agent that should address conflicts:

*As we work to keep the world's most destructive weapons out of conflicts, we must also strengthen the international community's ability to address those conflicts themselves.*



In his speech in 1995, Clinton referred to the international community as a body that can impose sanctions:

*States that sponsor terrorists should feel the full weight of sanctions that can be imposed by the international community.*

In 2000, he portrayed it as an entity that holds interests:

*Even in Kosovo, NATO's actions followed a clear consensus, expressed in several Security Council resolutions, that the atrocities committed by Serb forces were unacceptable and that the international community had a compelling interest in seeing them end.*

In 2013, in a speech that mentioned the international community 11 times, Obama explicitly referred to the actions of the international community:

*There will be times when the breakdown of societies is so great and the violence against civilians so substantial, that the international community will be called upon to act.*

The international community is not merely an agent but also a normative structure that is assigned with specific content that frames the international community as particular to the operation of states and constructs it. For example, in 2011 Obama outlined:

*This is how the international community is supposed to work; nations standing together for the sake of peace and security, and individuals claiming their rights.*

This is where the depictions of the international community as an agent on the one hand and as a structure infused with certain values and virtues on the other hand overlap. In this respect, the US takes part in its discursive construction both at the normative and practical levels. For example, in 1997 Clinton referred to the universal values that the international community represents while distinguishing them from particular American or Western values:

*Fifty years ago the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated the international community's conviction that people everywhere have the right to be treated with dignity, to give voice to their opinions and to choose their leaders; that these rights are universal; not American rights, not Western rights, not rights for the developed world only, but rights inherent in the humanity of people.*

In his last address to the Assembly in 2008, Bush noted:

*No cause can justify the deliberate taking of innocent life, and the international community is nearing universal agreement on this truth. The vast majority of nations in this Assembly now agree that tactics like suicide bombing, hostage-taking and hijacking are never legitimate.*



This last quote illustrates the linkage between the norms and values of the international community and the construction of legitimate and illegitimate actions, as well as points to the need to reconstruct those in light of changing circumstances. For example, Obama stated in 2013:

*Today, the crisis in Syria and the destabilization of the region goes to the heart of broader challenges that the international community must now confront. How should we respond to conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa – conflicts between countries, but also conflicts within them? [...] Different nations will not agree on the need for action in every instance, and the principle of sovereignty is at the centre of our international order. But sovereignty cannot be a shield for tyrants to commit wanton murder or an excuse for the international community to turn a blind eye.*

The references of the United States to the international community in the context of speeches at the UNGA illustrate, from a very specific viewpoint, various aspects of the discursive construction of the concept. These aspects include the location of the I and other I's as members of a greater We, the normative elements that the concept carries, the values and practices associated with it, its depiction as an imagined agent that is capable of acting, and its function as a legitimacy device to draw the lines of illegitimate conduct. However, as mentioned above, the qualitative review of the references to international community is limited in its ability to provide a full picture in regard to who the international community is as a construct shared by all states. Thereby, any attempt to understand who the international community is, let alone to point to its dynamics, requires a broader and more comprehensive analysis that piles together all references. The next research stage applies a topic modeling method on all 15,122 references to the international community in the UNGA in order to map the various facets that construct the concept and to point to the patterns of its discursive construction. This will enable us to explore the content of the term "international community" that characterizes international relations.

## *5.2 The Discursive Construction of the International Community: A Topic Modeling Approach*

Following the argument that the international community exists only through agents' references to it, the fact that states refer to the international community so frequently points to the presence of the construct and to the potential roles it may play as a dominant reference point. However, what are the discursive elements that it is constructed from? In an attempt to understand what states are talking about when they refer to the international community, I have used topic modeling, an automatic machine-learning feature that is embedded in the Wordstat software to extract, based on keywords co-occurrences and association patterns, ten main topics of states' references to the international community (see Table 1 for the full list of topics and keywords).

Table 1: International Community – Topic Models

No.	TOPIC	KEYWORDS	% VAR	% CASES	% STATES
1	UNITED NATIONS	UNITED NATIONS; CHARTER; GENERAL ASSEMBLY; SESSION; SECRETARY	1,73	22 %	100 %
2	SECURITY COUNCIL	SECURITY COUNCIL; RESOLUTIONS;	1,55	5 %	88 %
3	DEVELOPMENT	MILLENNIUM; GOALS; DEVELOPMENT; SUSTAINABLE; SMALL ISLAND; DEVELOPING	1,6	12 %	95 %
4	SECURITY; PEACE & TERRORISM	CONFLICT; TERROR*; SECURITY; PEACE; WEAPONS; PROLIFERATION; NUCLEAR; DESTRUCTION; DISARMAMENT; ARMS	1,16	24 %	100 %
5	AFRICA	AFRICA*; AFRICAN_UNION; SOUTH	1,34	8 %	80 %
6	HUMAN RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY	HUMAN_RIGHTS; UNIVERSAL; DEMOCRA*	1,58	11 %	97 %
7	SOCIO-ECONOMIC	ECONOM*; SOCIAL; SUPPORT; FINANCIAL	1,59	11 %	95 %
8	PALESTINIAN/ ISRAEL	PALESTINI*; ISRAEL*; ARAB; MIDDLE EAST	1,59	5 %	74 %
9	CLIMATE CHANGE	CLIMATE CHANGE	1,33	1.5 %	60 %
10	BOSNIA	BOSNIA; HERZEGOVINA; YUGOSLAVIA	1,45	1.5 %	46 %

**Note:** The table presents ten most common topics in international community references based on keywords analysis by case appearances and states' usage (n=15,122; 1992-2014).

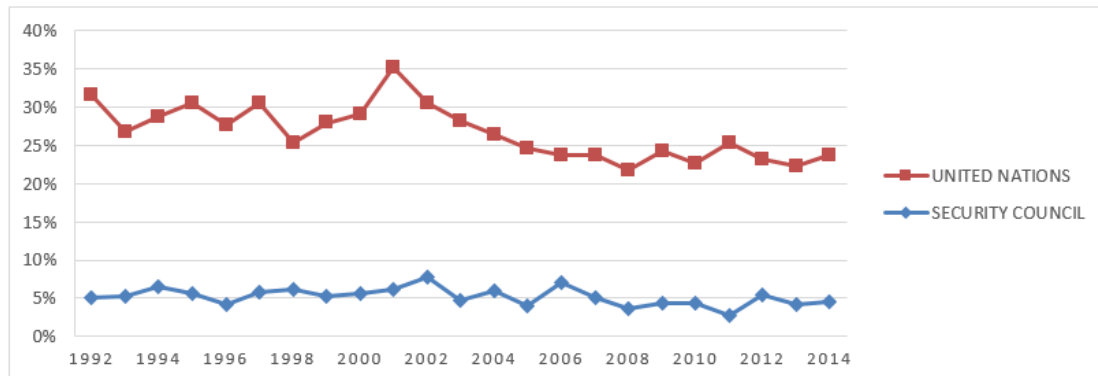
The table clearly shows the salience of topics that construct the international community as well as the distribution of attention across states. The ten topics can be divided into three subgroups that reflect three aspects of the international community and its actions. First, *organizational* topics – relating to the UN as an institutional reference point. This includes the UN topic with specific references to the General Assembly and the Secretary General and the UN Security Council (UNSC) topic as representing how, where, and by whom actions are organized and decided. Second, *thematic* references to five dominant themes of world politics representing contexts of actions: development; socio-economics; terror and weapons; human rights and democracy; and climate change. Third, *action spheres* – i.e. geopolitical references to three specific areas of political occurrence and action: Africa, Bosnia, and the Middle East (Palestine/Israel). As will be presented below, each of these topics plays a different role in the discursive construction of the international community, and their relative weight varies across time. I also use illustrative qualitative examples from different states in different years in order to demonstrate the computerized analysis and the constructions of the various topics in the context of the international community.

### 5.3 The UN

The analysis shows that the core element in the construction of the international community is the UN and its organs. All states associate, at some point or another, the international community with both the UN in general and the UNSC in particular. Time effects (see Figure 3) are relatively insignificant, although while references to the UNSC are stable throughout the time span, there is a moderate decline in the general UN topic.

The strong link between the international community and the UN is not surprising. While it might derive from the fact that the analyzed texts are carried out in the UNGA itself, the UN is over and over again perpetuated as an institutional framework for the collective We of states, in line with its initial design and in the spirit of the UN Charter. States use the term “international community” in order to associate both the UN and the UNSC as principals of a collective We of states that operate on its behalf and for collective purposes. However, states do not necessarily portray the UN as the epiphany of the international community. The international community is often depicted alongside the UN or the UNSC as a pseudo-entity in its own right. Eleven percent of all references to the international community contain action verbs that attribute it with agential capacities to support, acknowledge, respond, pressure, hold interest, and act in specific situations. Only six states – Brunei Darussalam, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Montenegro, Tonga, Turkmenistan, and Venezuela – refrain from using the international community action discourse.

Figure 3: References to the UN and UNSC Topics



**Note:** The figure shows the percentage of references to the international community with the subject the UN or the UNSC (1992-2014).

Dominant phrases in this context depict the UN as the organizational hub or operative medium of the international community, a conduit through which states come together as an international community, make collective decisions, and act in lights of problems and challenges. For example, in the speech in 1997 Egypt noted:

*All this gives rise to a situation which requires the international community to cooperate and become interdependent in its endeavours in a manner that helps it live in security and to progress confidently. This cannot take place unless the United Nations become the focal point and the centre of its concerted actions.*

Similarly, Azerbaijan stated in 1999:

*I would like to express my profound respect and appreciation to the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. Ban Ki-moon, for his leadership in mobilizing the international community to make our world a better place to live.*

In this respect, the UN is not the international community, but rather its institutional counterpart. For example, this is visible in one of the speeches by Fiji in 1996:

*The various organs, agencies and departments of the United Nations need to be rationalized in line with the modalities of today's world, and structural changes and more personnel reforms must be instituted to make it more responsive to the constant demands of a continuously changing international community.*

Another example is Algeria's speech in 2003:

*The international community finds itself squarely faced with the duty to restore its cohesion and mobilize its means and energy towards full rehabilitation of the United Nations, through the upholding, by all, of the Charter's purposes and principles, which constitute the indispensable foundations for a civilized international society.*

The UNSC, and mainly the UNSC resolutions, are often portrayed as an executive branch of the international community. As a realm of Governance, it allows for collective action and defines the commitments that states should conform with on the one hand, but on the other hand restrains and defines the international community itself. For example, here are quotations of two permanent members of the UNSC:

*The Security Council is endowed with a specific mechanism for harmonizing political will and for protecting the national interests of a great variety of States, and, through this, the interests of the entire international community. (Russia, 2003)*

*In the effort to reduce and prevent large-scale humanitarian crises, the international community should strictly observe the United Nations Charter, respect the opinions of the countries or organizations concerned and, with the Security Council's authorization, explore, to the greatest extent possible, peaceful settlement within the United Nations framework. (China, 2005)*

References to the UNSC can also be found in the speeches of non-members of the council. For example, Denmark in 2000 asserted:

*The Security Council has a moral obligation to act on behalf of the international community.*

Another example is Gambia's speech in 2002:

*The Security Council must show more leadership in the efforts of the international community to contain and resolve the serious tensions between Israel and Palestine, which pose a grave threat to the stability of the nations in the region and the peace of the whole world.*

### 5.4 Setting the International Agenda

The second subcategory of topics refers to five specific themes that dominate the inter-state discourse in the context of the international community. This, I argue, represents the dynamic repertoire of action contexts of the international community and its members, and the distribution of attention to various issues. The analysis shows that states refer to these themes in various degrees but in a coherent way. The most salient topic is security and peace, and then, in a descending order, states pay attention to development, human rights and democracy, socio-economics, and finally climate change. A selection of quotes from the speeches shows the contextual framing of the international community. With respect to security and peace, one can find references to the international community and its quest to fight threats of terror, for example in Mexico's speech in 2001:

*The brutal events of 11 September make it imperative that we, the international community, engage in multilateral negotiations to formulate new rules and standards to guarantee international peace and security.*

Another issue in this category is weapon proliferation, for example in the speech by Latvia in 2012:

*The risk of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is one of the most serious global threats. The international community should be united in its commitment to prevent it.*

A respond to these threats via promoting peace is mentioned, for example, in the speech by Australia in 1993:

*We still do not have even a completely clear and consistent shared vocabulary to define the ways in which it is possible for the United Nations and other organs of the international community to respond to security problems: 'peacemaking,' for example, means different things still to different people; so do 'preventive diplomacy' and 'peace building'; the conceptual boundary between 'peace-keeping' on the one hand and 'peace enforcement' on the other is not drawn in the same way by everyone who uses these terms.*

The role of the international community is prevalent in the context of advancing human rights and democracy, both by states who are known for holding these values, for example as stated by Sweden in its speech in 2000:

*It is the duty of the international community and our duty as political leaders to act and react when human rights and fundamental freedoms are violated.*

But also states who may seem more removed from liberal and democratic values express similar views – for example, Libya in 2013:

*Once again calls upon the international community and human rights institutions to put an end to the human tragedy being experienced by the Muslim Rohingya minority in Myanmar and to accelerate the setting up of an international investigation committee to bring those responsible for the tragedy before international justice.*

While the first two topics seem to be natural attributions to a greater international community, the other three represent the penetration of new, non-traditional issue areas into the inter-state realm. In this regard, references to the international community in the context of socio-economic issues or as a measure to

promote development and equality arguably shift the focus from states to people. This is expressed in the speech by Chile in 1992 or by Germany in 2000:

*Reducing poverty, increasing employment and promoting social cohesion are needs shared by the entire international community. (Chile, 1992)*

*In view of this situation, the international community must make every effort in the coming decade to ensure that globalization benefits all people. (Germany, 2000)*

This shift also applies to the topic of climate change, which represents a transnational and global area that transcends borders and territories. The role and responsibility of the international community in confronting climate change is voiced mostly by developing states who seek the commitment of the more industrialized and developed states. The following quotes illustrate this:

*For countries such as ours, it is therefore of paramount importance that the international community honour its commitments, realize the speedy implementation of the Cancun Agreements and honour its pledges to the Special Climate Change Fund and the Adaptation Fund. (Suriname, 2011)*

*Our survival and security, and our children's future livelihood, have been seriously compromised by the international community's inaction on climate change. (Tuvalu, 2013)*

However, climate change and other transnational issues have been bundled alongside other topics as part of the contemporary set of issues that confront the international community, as voiced by more developed states. For example, South Korea stated in 2012:

*Although new global challenges to mankind such as climate change, poverty and disease, underdevelopment, terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction are now testing the international community, I have no doubt that we will overcome those challenges on our future path.*

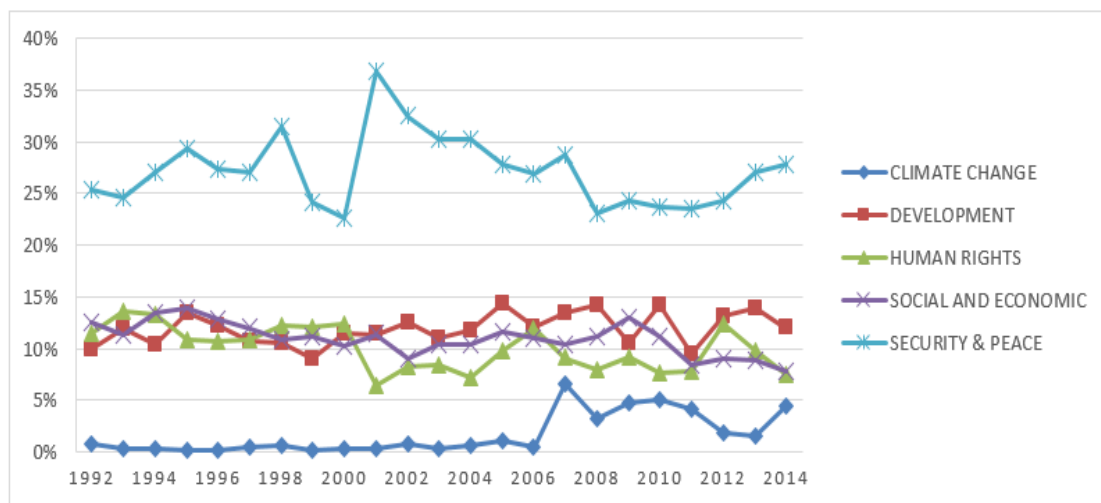
Similarly, Chile asserted in 2014:

*These challenges include regional wars, ethnic and religious tensions, humanitarian crises, the trampling of human rights, the break-up of several States, climate change, deepening inequality, cross-border terrorism and the spread of terrible pandemics such as Ebola, all of which require a firm, urgent response on the part of the international community.*

All of these themes, separately and together, are portrayed as issues that pose challenges that affect the world as a whole (even if unevenly) and require attention of the international community. This is the array of issues in which states may operate and act on behalf of the international community. This list of issues may seem intuitive and general. However, as the naming and distinction between the topics was produced in an unsupervised method, based on keywords co-occurrences, it is a good example of how we can learn from international texts on the collective agenda of states in a given time period and on the processes of contextualizing the collective We of states in specific issues.

The patterns of topics' distribution are also evident in the longitudinal analysis (see Figure 4). First, it demonstrates the degree to which the topic of security is much more dominant than the other four topics. Second, it shows that except for the topic of climate change that penetrated the inter-state construction of the international community only after 2006, the other four topics have kept a relatively stable pattern throughout the years. One interesting exception is the high rise in the security topic between 2001 and 2006 (the UNGA general debate of 2001 began ten days after the 9/11 attack in New York) and a parallel decline (although not as significant) in the role of the human rights and democracy topic. States, therefore, chose during that period to discursively reconstruct the international community more around issues of security and less around issues of human rights and democracy, in a way that reflects the political realm in these years.

Figure 4: References to the Policy and Political Issues



**Note:** The figure shows the percentage of international community references in a certain year that their subject was either climate change, development, human rights, socio-economics, or terrorism (1992-2014).

## 5.5 Where Should We Operate?

Three topics concern specific political spheres to which the international community is discursively associated: Africa, the Middle East, and the former Yugoslavia. These three areas of the world drew the attention of the international community after 1992. States' speeches show interest in these areas and portray the responsibility of the international community to stabilize these regions. For example, Morocco referred to the role of the international community in the former Yugoslavian states in 1992:

*The Kingdom of Morocco strongly condemns those acts and calls upon the international community to stand by the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina in preserving their national unity, independence, territorial integrity and cultural identity by resorting to all the coercive measures provided for in the United Nations Charter to force compliance with its decisions on this issue.*

Similarly, Iceland stated in 1993:

*The inhumanity perpetrated on innocent civilians in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other former Yugoslav Republics has reached a point where the international community must act, and decisively, with all the resources provided for in the Charter of the United Nations.*

Nonetheless, states pay more attention to the role of the international community in both the Middle East, especially in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Africa. However, the association of the international community with these three topics is uneven and is highly determined by specific groups of states, as the lion's share of the topic is constructed by states that are geographically located and operate in these areas. African states talk about Africa and the international community – as, for example, Ghana in 1995:

*African countries have committed themselves repeatedly to carry out far-reaching economic and institutional reforms, on the express understanding that their efforts would be fully complemented by the requisite material support of the international community, particularly the advanced countries.*

Another example is Rwanda's speech in that same year:

*This is why the Government and the people of Rwanda need understanding and assistance from the African community and the international community; so that a Rwandan nation can be built on an unshakable foundation and the Rwandan people can enjoy a genuine national reconciliation.*

Similarly, Middle Eastern states talk about the role and responsibility of the international community in the Middle East, even when the legitimate membership of these very states in the international community is questionable. For example, Iran in 2004 stated the following:

*It is time for the international community to show its resolve to maintain the credibility of multilateral disarmament instruments by taking action to compel Israel to comply.*

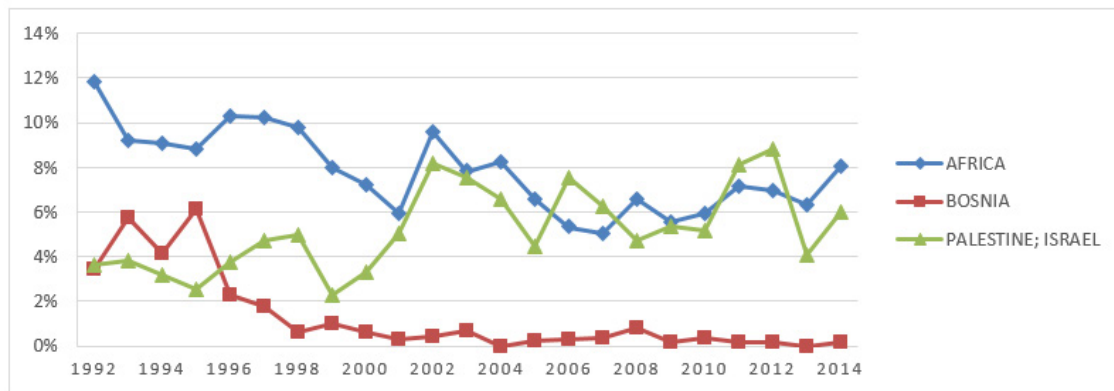
A further example is Iraq's speech in 2009:

*Iraq calls on the international community and all peace-loving forces to stand by the Palestinian people in their legitimate struggle to achieve their goals and demands that the Israeli Government fully withdraw from all Arab territories occupied in 1967.*

Note that as opposed to the remaining seven topics that construct the international community discourse, the weight of each of these three topics changes throughout the years (see Figure 5). Not surprisingly, the role of the Bosnia topic declined significantly in the mid-1990s and has become negligible since then. The trajectories of the Africa and Middle East topics show that until the early 2000s the Africa topic dominated. From thereon, however, we can identify a slight decline in the role of Africa and an increase of the role of the Middle East – which altogether puts them more or a less at the same level in terms of contribution to the discursive construction of the international community.



Figure 5: References to Geopolitical Areas



**Note:** The figure shows the percentage of international community references in a certain year that their subject was Africa, Bosnia, or the Middle East (1992-2014).

These patterns suggest that the international community discourse is not unified but rather dynamic and contested. On the one hand, the vast majority of states constantly refer to the existence and operation of the international community in general and in specific issues in particular, and thereby legitimize and reinforce the notion of a collective ethos of states. On the other hand, the content and substances that construct this ethos might be contingent on the attempts of specific agents to shape the discursive construction of the international community. This is, however, the focus of another research project aimed at exploring how we can explain tendencies of specific states in specific contexts to engage in various constructions of the international community.

## 6. Discussion

Focusing on discursive interactions among states, in this working paper I have strived to portray how political agents themselves understand, experience, and express the role played by the collective We of states. I argue that since the international community is constituted by discourse, we can understand it through the ways in which agents produce and reproduce it as well as locate it (discursively) in social reality. As clearly shown in the analysis of states' speeches in the UNGA, states talk about themselves as an international community. They publicly refer to their common lifeworld by discursively affiliating themselves with a grander notion of the collective We of states. This does not imply that the discursive international community is necessarily thick, consolidated, or uniform. It rather serves as a pluralistic, dynamic, and discursively constructed social reference point through which states act as agents that "can move on to refer to common experiences, develop shared understandings of history, and, thus, to develop a collective culture" (Risse 2000: 16). To put it differently, the international community as a discursive choice and discursive practice is a signifier through which states can form collective and particular understanding of the world and legitimate international conduct in its context.

However, under what conditions may it actually affect agents' behavior in the international sphere and how? As the international community is discursive, its social effects are to a great extent discursive. There

is no practical way to include or exclude members of the community, and in practice even measures like sanctions are, at the end of the day, dominated by the five UNSC permanent members and not part of the prerogatives of the community as whole. However, this does not mean that the discursive construction of the international community in general and in the UNGA in particular is meaningless. By identifying the patterns of how states recognize and construct the collective We, one can discern and apprehend the international *zeitgeist* as a “barometer” of the basic elements that inform international relations. One can thus illuminate specific patterns of power and political relations and therefore the components that construct the general class of being a state, as well as the individual statuses of specific states within the greater We. The substances that instill meanings to the ethos and define the specific and unique virtues of political conduct are dynamically constructed by states through their discursive interactions and are contingent upon the relative position of specific states and their ability to shape the dominant discourse.

The dominant discourse is dynamic and contested by definition. The international community is by no means a harmonious hub or a zone of peace. It hosts political entities with various, and sometimes contradicting, interests and preferences that often interact and argue over the ways to maintain stability and define rightful conduct. However, this does not make it less of a community, and it would be wrong to dismiss it merely on the grounds that it is “loose and empty” (Bliesemann de Guevara/Kühn 2011) or merely a political myth (Kaczmarek 2016). The international community discourse is significant since it is at odds with the basic premises of various strands of IR theory. According to the common portrayal of the state as a self-interested agent in an anarchical and loosely institutionalized system (and regardless of whether the interests are based on cost/benefit rationality or are socially constructed), states are supposed to refrain from affiliating themselves with a greater We of states, from pointing to areas of common challenges, and from generally speaking of collective actions and responses (or at least do so only in specific situations, under certain conditions, and in cases of greater identity overlaps). While IR theory has obviously dealt with issues of collective action and international cooperation, it has yet to provide theoretical lenses to understand the perception of a collective We of states as a main and dominant narrative that informs the ways through which states interact among themselves.

The international community cannot exist in a vacuum. While it may be in the eyes of the beholder, the beholder is a social agent that is tied to a greater net of structures and relations. Therefore, it might not represent a whole We, but it is also not the sum of the diverse I's. Thus, as much as the international community is framed by hegemony, hegemony needs it in order to frame their actions as legitimate (Byers 2003), because the construction of the collective We of states entitles any state to make claims in its name and participate in its discursive construction.

Under these premises, this paper has attempted to provide more than merely a rhetorical analysis. It argues that even if the concept of the international community is purely a rhetorical device used by international political leaders, there is still great significance in understanding its role as a discursive choice and practice. Eventually, the mere fact that it is used in day-to-day international politics, by all states, and moreover as a means to legitimize (or delegitimize) political behavior, suggests that states not only discern a community of states at the international level, but also calculate and frame their actions in light of it. Moreover, at the political level, the notion of the international community is conducive for translating and articulating particular political preferences into universal normative and legal claims (Koskeniemi 2004).

This might be a significant feature in adaptation processes to various phenomena that entail change and thus require re-defining the We and its missions like for example in the end of the Cold War and in the context of globalization.

The themes that construct the international community stand in the core of this working paper. It presents the initial findings from a wider project that has two main purposes. First, it is designed to provide a comprehensive outlook on the international community as it is constructed by the agents that constitute it. Second, it seeks to engage with advanced research methods that enable a systematic analysis of a large-N textual database using computerized quantitative and qualitative methods as a means to deduce common patterns in states' international interactions. Given the dominance of the concept in the international political discourse and the tendency to attribute to it both normative and practical roles, this project offers three contributions to the scholarly field. Theoretically, it develops a discursive epistemology as an analytical framework to the concept of international community. Methodologically, it utilizes methods of computerized content analysis that enable to explore "international relations" in their most literal manifestation through the ways states talk among themselves about the world they aim to govern. Empirically, it proposes an additional prism to construe the array of common legitimate rules of conduct that constitute the international community, as well as dynamics of these rules since the end of the Cold War until today.

Future research must be done in order to assess two important aspects of the discursive construction of the international community. The first should focus on exploring how we can explain the tendencies of specific states in specific contexts to engage in various constructions of the international community. Methods of cluster and network analysis might be useful to determine which groups of states perceive what kind of an international community, and how various international, national, and regional variables may be able to explain grouping patterns. It can also allow tracing how the discourse is constructed, and who leads these processes. Secondly, we should ask to what extent the international community discourse pushes states towards standardization of discursive and non-discursive practices. To this end, measuring proximities in states' discourse and more importantly changes in them can determine how states coordinate the tension between the I and the We and how various responses construct dominant international voices through the adaptation of states' self-performance and self-presentation in the context of a greater We of states.

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